

Fourth Sunday of Easter A2023

Last Sunday I told you the story of the Mass celebrated in Emmaus at the occasion of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Here is another story from the Holy Land. This time we were going from Jericho to Nazareth. On the hill we saw a herd of sheep with a shepherd leading them. It was a wonderful spectacle to see those sheep running all over and a shepherd trying to contain them. It was so beautiful that I asked the driver to stop the bus so that we enjoy the spectacle before us.

As all that was unfolding before our eyes, my thoughts went to the Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I want" and this chapter 10 of the Gospel of John in which Jesus claims to be the shepherd of the sheep.

To better understand such a claim, there are two things we have to know. First, the ancient Jewish society was rural and to have a livestock, like sheep, was common. Second, the shepherd had a big role to play for the welfare of the sheep. He had to find a right pasture where he could lead the sheep for food. In time of heat, he had to lead the sheep to streams of water for refreshment. In bad weather, he had to lead them to secure place and protect them. At night in particular, he had to gather the sheep together and protect them against the wild animals. In a nutshell, night or day, the shepherd had to be vigilant, motivated and concerned for the safety of his flock.

When Jesus says that he is the shepherd, he means that he assumes this role for all those who belong to him. His love and concern for each one of us are evidenced in his giving up of his life on the cross for our salvation. That is why he contrasts the behavior of true Shepherd, with fake shepherds, thieves, and robbers.

Our Lord is not like those who came before him and contributed to the perdition of the people of God by letting them follow strange paths which, eventually, led them away from God. As a true Shepherd, our Lord leads us like his sheep, giving us food and protection. He provides for our needs, protects us and leads us to true happiness.

Our Lord is not only a shepherd whose voice is recognized by his sheep, he is also the gate for the sheep. By using this word, our Lord wants to tell us that he is the door that leads to the Father and the fullness of life. He opens the way to God and allows us to have access to him. Through Him, God gives himself to the world, and the world has access to God in a unique way.

Our Lord is the gate through which the entrance to God becomes possible. Through him we can go in and come out unharmed and safe, and find our freedom and our nourishment. When people can go in and out without fear, it means that their country is safe; law and order are respected; and they enjoy full security. When our life is in our Lord's hands, the worries and fear are gone, because there is an assurance that the good shepherd, looks after us. That is why the title of shepherd means ownership.

The paradox, however, is that while our Lord is the only secure gate so that by entering through him we are saved, many refuse to enter through him. Meanwhile, they let a lot of people enter their lives and mercilessly destroy them. As the experience has taught us, today many people are psychologically broken and emotionally wounded because they have let dubious people enter their lives and abuse them. Jesus, who is so good and who can bless us, they never allowed him to enter their lives.

And yet, our Lord has come so that we may have life and have it in abundance. By refusing to let him enter our lives, we expose ourselves to countless dangers. By not entering through him, the secure door, we jeopardize our lives. Where we go there are predators, thieves and robbers who can only destroy us. If we accept our Lord to lead us, we create the conditions of vitality and superabundance of life for us.

The image of shepherd symbolizes also the role of leadership. Three axes open up here: the church, the family and society. Anyone willing to assume the role of leadership in the footsteps of our Lord should act only for the best interest of those entrusted to him and put at their service the best of his talents and skills.

Priests, parents, teachers, doctors, nurses, government officials, and caregivers, among many others, are all shepherds. We become good shepherds by loving those entrusted to us, praying for them and spending our time, talents and treasures for their welfare. Parents in particular show their good leadership when they perfectly carry out their duties toward their children by giving them good example of life and sound religious instruction. Parents show their leadership when they are not there just for paying the bills, but when they pray for their children, they live according to sound Christian moral principles and bring their children to do the same.

Our local parish is our sheepfold, and our priests are our shepherds. As the good sheep of the parish, parishioners are expected to hear and follow the voice of their shepherds through their homilies, Bible classes, counseling, and advice. They have to receive the spiritual food given them by their regular participation in the Holy Mass, their frequentation of the Sacraments and their participation in prayer services, renewal programs and missions of the Church.

The Sunday of the good shepherd is also the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. We need to pray for good priests and for vocation to priesthood and religious life. All the Christian people need to pray for vocations both in the Church and in their families. Parents need to respect and encourage a child who shows an interest in becoming a priest or deacon or entering upon a consecrated life. Parents need to encourage their children, including their teenagers and young adults, to participate actively in the children's and youth activities in the parish, like Sunday school, children's clubs, and youth associations. They also need to encourage and support them in becoming altar servers, gift-bearers, lectors, Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist or ministers of hospitality.

On this World Day of Prayer for Vocations, let us pray to Christ, the good shepherd, to help us imitate him in our leadership. Let us pray for the leaders of our Church and those who govern us so that they are good shepherds. Let us pray for one another so that we all listen to Jesus, our good Shepherd. May God give us a lot of priests, consecrated men and women, and deacons!

Acts 2: 14a, 36-41; 1 Peter 2: 20b-25; John 10: 1-10



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